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### Dale E. Luffman, *The Book of Mormon's Witness to Its First Readers*

Reviewed by Christopher James Blythe

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Dale E. Luffman. *The Book of Mormon's Witness to Its First Readers*. Independence: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013.

*Reviewed by Christopher James Blythe*

*THE BOOK OF MORMON'S WITNESS TO ITS FIRST READERS* is a thoughtful devotional volume written by a member of Community of Christ's Council of Twelve Apostles, published by the church's seminary, and designed as much to shape current understandings of the Book of Mormon in that tradition as it is in understanding the past. The handsome 212-page book is divided into fifteen short chapters discussing the purpose and importance of scripture, nineteenth-century historical contextualization, and the content of the text itself. Each chapter is accompanied with somewhere between seven and nine "Questions for Consideration" intended to enhance personal or classroom study.

The purpose of this volume is twofold. First, Luffman is conducting an investigation on how early Mormons would have understood the Book of Mormon text based on the context of their lives. Second, he is exploring how the Book of Mormon could be effectively employed in the twenty-first-century Community of Christ. I think it is important to understand this second facet to truly appreciate the significance of this work. Over the past several decades, as Community of Christ has moved in an increasingly mainline Christian direction, the Book of Mormon has taken a back seat in discourse and devotion. It has not been until more recent times that the church has sought to reclaim its

distinctive Restoration past while continuing to hold onto the inclusive, nonliteralistic, ecumenical theology that it has embraced in the interim.

Luffman explicitly longs for Community of Christ members to again read and ponder the Book of Mormon and this too in response to a prophetic call. He cites the canonized revelations of the two most recent Community of Christ presidents. First, Grant McMurray's section 162, which states, "Be respectful of tradition and sensitive to one another, but do not be unduly bound by interpretations and procedures that no longer fit the needs of a worldwide church" (CofC D&C 162:2d). And again, he cites current President Stephen M. Veazy's contribution to the Doctrine and Covenants, section 164. In part, the revelation pointed to a renewal of the church's experience with scripture. It testified of scripture as "an indispensable witness to the Eternal Source of light and truth," while warning that it was produced by fallible authors. Scripture was not to replace "the Eternal One of whom scripture testifies" as a source of worship. Both of these scriptural admonitions pointed Community of Christ members to take seriously their Restoration DNA without being limited to conservative/literal renderings of the text.

That being said, Luffman is at his best when writing about the text itself. While my reading of the Book of Mormon differs in fundamental ways from his own, I found myself moved at times by his exegesis. Luffman found a good way to bring to life the Book of Mormon's message in guiding the reader to understand how early Latter-day Saints might have read the text. For example, I appreciated Luffman's emphasis on the scripture's critique of capitalism. "This book was to inspire faith and encourage faithfulness, especially among the disaffected and dislocated, the marginalized and the poor" (p. 41). In fact, Luffman refers to the Book of Mormon's concern for social justice as one of the major themes that twenty-first-century readers might find troubling, in a way that the earliest readers did not. His exploration on the volume's presentation of the divinity of Christ and soteriology is also strong.

In bringing to life the world of early Mormonism, Luffman depends on the work of a number of scholars. In particular, he draws on the scholarship of Grant Hardy, Nathan Hatch, Robert Hullinger, D. Michael

Quinn, and Mark D. Thomas. Luffman's discussion of the Book of Mormon as literature is quite fine. On the other hand, while I commend his efforts when he is actually providing a nineteenth-century reception history, there are moments when he seems to be deliberately arguing for a nineteenth-century authorship of the text. This is particularly apparent in his chapter on conversion in the Book of Mormon, which closely follows Grant Palmer's *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins*.

I must admit that I think *The Book of Mormon's Witness to Its First Readers* falls short—although not entirely—in its effort to understand the manner in which early Mormons interpreted the scriptural text. While Luffman has employed a number of significant scholarly works to demonstrate the practical concerns of the nineteenth-century reader, he has not consulted those readers directly. There is not a single primary source included in this volume. For example, Luffman continues to return to the Book of Mormon's critique of Deist philosophies concerning the nature of God, continuing revelation, and so forth. I was left wondering if early Mormons saw within their scripture a critique of Deism, or if other interpretations such as a critique on credal Christianity were just as likely.

I would not recommend this volume to an individual seeking a better understanding of the Book of Mormon text. For this, better options are on the market, some of which were consulted by Luffman in his work. I would, however, recommend this volume for someone interested in how non-LDS Restoration bodies are actively wrestling with the Book of Mormon. Luffman complicates the common (and not entirely misplaced) Latter-day Saint understanding of Community of Christ views on the Book of Mormon—that it has abandoned the text or completely ignored it. Even those, such as myself, who disagree with aspects of Luffman's understanding of the Book of Mormon should applaud this project for the care and respect with which it treats this sacred volume of scripture. *The Book of Mormon's Witness to Its First Readers* will easily convince its audience that there is still a place for the founding scripture of the Restoration in Community of Christ worship.

**Christopher James Blythe** is a historian working on the *Joseph Smith Papers*. He completed a PhD at Florida State University in American religious history in 2015. Blythe also holds degrees from Utah State University and Texas A&M University. His published research has appeared in several academic journals including *Nova Religio*, *Communal Societies*, and *Journal of Mormon History*.

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Joseph M. Spencer. *An Other Testament: On Typology*. Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2012.

*Reviewed by Rosalynde Frandsen Welch*

A SEAFARING ISRAELITE CLAN FLEES JERUSALEM to establish a colony in the Western Hemisphere. There a schism between brothers fractures the young society into rival factions, carving out two competing views of the tribe's history and future. These factions compete for ascendancy across six centuries of political and religious upheaval, until a long-prophesied Messiah arrives to harmonize and heal the rift.

This is the broadest outline of Joseph Spencer's account of the Book of Mormon, and from high altitude this appears to be an unremarkable summary of the scripture. But it is not the ethnic history of Nephite and Lamanite that Spencer has in view. Rather, he traces a fascinating and novel theological fault line through the Book of Mormon, a split that begins at a subtle difference of emphasis between Nephi and Jacob, and reaches its fullest development in Abinadi's sharply delineated departure from Nephi's interpretation of Isaiah. The Abinadite view holds sway in the Nephite church until Christ's personal ministry closes the chasm.

Spencer's argument, developed in his book *An Other Testament: On Typology*, soon to be reissued by the Maxwell Institute, is at once a fresh avenue into Book of Mormon studies and an incremental development of his distinguished forebears in the field. Spencer draws generously on the work of Hugh Nibley, John Welch, Royal Skousen, Noel Reynolds, Kent Jackson, Grant Hardy, Brant Gardner, and other